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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL OSCE TU

SUBJECT: TURKEY: RULING AKP TACKLES A TABOO -- IMPROVING
TREATMENT OF ALEVIS

Classified By: Political Counselor Janice G. Weiner, reasons 1.4 (b),(d)
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1.(C) Summary: The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) plans to launch a campaign of Alevi outreach on January 11, when PM Erdogan hosts 500 Alevis at an Iftar dinner on the occasion of Muharrem the Alevi month of mourning. Following the dinner, AKP MP Reha Camuroglu, an Alevi, plans to form a government commission to discuss with Alevis proposals for expanding Alevi rights. Camuroglu faces an uphill battle. He must convince AKP leadership and Turkey's Sunni bureaucratic establishment of the benefits of granting rights to Alevis. He must also gain the trust of a highly secular Alevi community still deeply skeptical AKP's religious roots. A sincere attempt to deal with this previously taboo topic would be truly groundbreaking. It remains to be seen whether PM Erdogan will muster the necessary support to push forward the controversial plan.
End summary.

AKP to Launch Alevi Reforms

¶2. (SBU) Turkey's estimated 15 to 20 million Alevis have several long-standing disputes with the GOT, not least of which are assessments of the community's size, which the GOT asserts is seven million. Far from a cohesive group, Alevis hold diverse opinions concerning religious identity. The government considers Alevism to be a heterodox Muslim sect. Most Alevis, however, view their faith as distinct from Sunni or Shia Islam. Their most pressing demands are equal treatment in public school religion courses and in the allocation of government resources for the construction and administration of Alevi gathering places (cem evi).

¶3. (C) The ruling AKP on January 11 will launch its multi-pronged approach to improve the situation of Turkey's Alevis, according to AKP Istanbul deputy Reha Camuroglu, an Alevi who is spearheading the initiative. PM Erdogan would host 500 Alevis and 500 AKP members at an Ankara Iftar dinner on the occasion of the month of Muharrem on the Islamic calendar, during which Alevis mourn "martyrs who fell in Karbala." The AKP would then form a government commission to meet with all Alevi groups to discuss AKP's proposals to:

--establish a new institution to finance and oversee the construction of cem evis (Alevi places of worship), and

payment of Dedes (Alevi religious leaders);
--construct at least one Alevi school to train Dedes;
--reform high school curriculum on religious education to include more accurate information on Alevis' beliefs; and
--air programs that showcase Alevi culture and history on state television and radio.

The dialogue would help AKP develop "historic" legislation that Camuroglu hopes parliament will pass over the next several years.

¶4. (C) Camuroglu recognizes he is fighting an uphill battle. He told us he must convince a state bureaucracy resistant to reforms, as well as skeptical Alevi NGOs. AKP Minister of State for Religious Affairs Mehmet Aydin had expressed support behind closed doors but has been reluctant to speak out publicly. Evidencing the bureaucracy's "deep-seated fear of change," Religious Affairs Directorate (Diyanet) President Ali Bardakoglu warned Camuroglu not to stray out of his lane as a politician, and maintained that the Diyanet would never accept cem evis as prayer houses. Pressure also came from Alevi NGOs that believe AKP has a hidden religious agenda and is merely seeking additional votes. Camuroglu believes that, to the contrary, PM Erdogan is resolved to pursue these projects not to capture new votes but to achieve a truly democratic country.

Alevi Groups Skeptical of AKP Plans

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¶5. (C) Husein Gazi Association official Ali Yildirim told us he is skeptical that AKP will sufficiently address Alevi complaints. He sees no evidence the project has wide support among AKP leadership. Deputy PM Cicek the previous week publicly had denied there was any such project on Alevis. Yildirim also noted that PM Erdogan's Iftar was culturally insensitive because Alevis do not celebrate during the month of mourning. Most Alevi organizations would boycott. Other examples of insensitivity were the government's continuing practice of turning cem houses into mosques and refusal to appoint any Alevi as a Governor, police official, Minister or Deputy Minister.

¶6. (C) Pir Sultan Abdal Alevi Association's President Kazim Genc told us AKP's plan is too limited in scope. A true solution requires that the government abolish the Diyanet, a discriminatory institution staffed solely by Sunnis and which promotes only Sunni views. The state also should put a stop to imposing Sunni religious lessons in schools, and rewrite laws so that all faiths are treated equally and allowed to practice freely.

¶7. (C) Prior to the public release of Camuroglu's proposal, Alevi Cem Foundation Chairman Izettin Dogan told us AKP's plans for Alevi outreach "was only for show." It was a positive step that the Education Ministry had added 10 pages of instruction on Alevism in year 12 -- the final year -- of the religious course curriculum, in response to a European Court of Human Rights ruling in favor of an Alevi parent who had argued his child should be exempt from mandatory religious courses that he claimed had a Sunni bias. But the government had again shown its insensitivity to Alevis by failing to consult them in the development of the course materials.

Erdogan Showing Courage

¶8. (C) Camuroglu called the criticisms of PM Erdogan's plans

to host an Iftar disingenuous. The Alevi groups who accused Erdogan of ignoring that Muharrem is a religious month of mourning were in reality ultrasecularists who generally shun all things religious. These groups had failed to put forth proposals of their own. In the near term, the government should continue the existence of the Diyanet while developing a separate institution to empower Alevis, he argued.

¶9. (C) Middle East Technical University (METU) Anthropology Professor Aykan Erdemir, an expert on Alevi culture, believes PM Erdogan has shown courage by bringing to the agenda the previously taboo topic of Alevi reconciliation. Erdogan would face challenges both from within his own Sunni community and an array of Alevi organizations. Success will require the greatest of delicacy, and missteps could increase animosity. Erdemir believes it will be critical to allow Alevis control over their own teaching and institutions so as to not give the impression that Sunnis are imposing their views on Alevis.

¶10. (C) Comment: AKP's proposals are groundbreaking. They address head-on the previously taboo topic of the treatment of Alevis and seek to address Alevis' main demands: an education free of religious rhetoric, the right to worship freely in cem houses, and a secular system not biased toward Sunni Islam. They would also implicitly address the need for religious tolerance. These steps would follow up on PM Erdogan's outreach to Alevis during the 2007 parliamentary election campaign when he persuaded Camuroglu to run (and gave him a guaranteed spot on AKP's Istanbul lists) and paid visits to several cem houses -- a first for a politician. It remains to be seen whether Erdogan can muster the political will to convince skeptical bureaucrats and his AKP of the benefits of Camuroglu's proposals. Doing so would be the first step in breaking the ice with a fiercely secular segment of the population -- generally inclined toward the opposition Republican People's Party -- that remains suspicious of the Sunni-dominated Turkish establishment and the governing AKP. End comment.

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